

What I did this summer: Stories from FFA Camp

Many students settling into another school year kept busy through the summer – especially those involved in Career and Technical Student Organizations with events like state and national conferences.

Hundreds of students made their way to the FFA Leadership Training Center (LTC) for a week of learning leadership abilities, teamwork skills and all-around fun.

In fact, LTC Director Kristie Guffey said this year saw record attendance the entire summer.

Attendees could pick from a variety of classes in which to participate, including public relations.

Those students, who attended the first-week camp, were put into small groups and assigned to come up with a story based on a unique experience at summer camp, all in an effort to promote FFA.

The following is a portion of the excerpts from these stories and some personal observations made by camp attendees.

An Unbe‘leaf’able History!

“Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it, the tree is the real thing.” This quote by Abraham Lincoln is found on the back of the shirts at the Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center.

Along with these words is a depiction of a large tree. Little do people know, the tree on the back of these shirts is actually a real tree located on the campgrounds.

There is significance to this mysterious tree, and it means more than meets the eye to the hundreds of campers and staff who have been wearing it on their backs all summer.

Guffey said the so-called “big tree” is 250 years old and is the largest white oak tree in Kentucky.

“Just a field beyond the tree is a marker for the cabin that Abraham Lincoln lived in from the ages of 4 to 7,” she added. “Think about how awesome that is – that we are literally standing in the presence of greatness.”

Orville Bennett, adviser of Lee County’s FFA chapter and a camp attendee for 34 years, said the sight of the huge tree was amazing.

“And just think, it’s on Kentucky FFA land! I think the tree’s size represents our FFA,” he said. “We’ve got chapters from the northern, southern, eastern and far west regions of the state. Kentucky FFA has members from all over, just like the tree has branches stretching in every direction.”

J.R. Zinner, adviser of the Western Hills High School (Franklin County) chapter, predicts that when the “big tree” dies, the white oak by the camp’s pool will be the next big tree.

“And it will be just as great because it’s beautiful,” he added.

Paul Goins, the Greenwood High School (Warren County) adviser, said he knows the story about the tree being the largest white oak in Kentucky and that it is very close to where Lincoln lived as a child. Most students and advisers that come to camp do. It becomes part of the overall story of camp.

The theme of the Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center this year is “Beyond All Limits.” The famous white oak is an outstanding mascot for this idea. This tree has grown bigger and better at a place that specializes in making the future of agriculture bigger and better. This tree, with its character and being the real thing, remains big and strong once again this summer.

Big Traditions

Participants of the Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center remember many traditions. Two of these traditions are cherished by the members and advisers who come to camp every year: the famous “Big Tree” and the infamous water ball, perhaps the most exciting of all activities offered at camp.

In this camp year of 2014, the “Big Tree” has been an ideal spot to observe. It contains so much history of not only the land the camp is built on, but the history of the camp itself.

The tree has made its own history of being the largest of its kind in Kentucky and the largest white oak tree in the United States. It provides the members and advisers symbolic support of how big FFA truly is.

“This is the first year I have seen the “Big Tree” and it’s just amazing how large it is and for what it represents,” said Bennett. “This tree has an Abraham Lincoln quote carved in it and is near the site of the Lincoln cabin, which makes this old oak an important part of this camp’s history.”

Just as the “Big Tree” is part of this camp’s history, water ball is, as well. The sport has been one of many offered during the summer camps attended by thousands of FFA members each year.

But it’s not just all about fun in the water; this sport led to a spectacular amount of teamwork being shown and leadership being put into action as the groups competed to win the game, which is actually basketball in the pool.

FFA is all about leadership and teamwork and going through struggles together, only to come out on the brighter side.

Not only do these traditions symbolize an individual meaning, but they come together to tell the bigger story of what FFA camp is all about. Just as, in water ball, all the members come

together to accomplish a set goal, the roots and trunk of the tree join together to help maintain a strong foundation.

More than just a jacket

Some would say it's just a jacket; others would disagree. Here at camp we all have a different idea of what it means to us personally. Some say it means determination; others say it means courage.

When you really think about it, though, it has a more complex meaning. Almost everyone in FFA has a jacket, and the people wearing the jackets aren't from the same place.

We could come from anywhere – Kentucky, Texas, Alaska, you name it. But we all have one thing in common: that blue jacket.

"It's the common thread to us all," said Brian Welch. "It brings us all closer and allows us to see that we're not alone in the world of agriculture. It allows us to branch out, make new friends and show pride for our heritage. That blue jacket is what holds us all together."

Inside the training center is a wall with FFA jackets from the past covering it from one end of the auditorium to the other.

"We have jackets from each county to keep in remembrance that we are a part of something great and that the heritage will live forever," Guffey said.

Webster County adviser Margo Bruce said that the first time she saw all the FFA jackets that hang on the wall, she thought, "Wow! Look at how many kids and chapters FFA has impacted!"

Asked what the FFA jacket means to her, Bruce replied, "Tradition." That's because it may not be the latest style or trend, but it stands for something more than just the current officer or member who wears it.

Webster County's other adviser, Jared Hankins, said he believes the jacket stands for hope and heritage.

"I have a new kind of pride when I have it on and it's not like any other," he said. "I believe that it gives people hope for the members' futures in high school, college and in the workforce."

The blue jacket isn't just an everyday jacket. It's a remembrance of a heritage and that all members are all part of something great.

"We all come together in unity and know that we are holding the future of a long-lasting tradition. The blue jacket reminds us that we aren't just average, everyday people, we are leaders," said student Madison Rayburn.

Many see the jacket as meaning FFA is not just a school club but a family, and even going to other counties, it's a bond that can't be broken.

"The jacket shows unity and more than that it shows a sense of belonging," said Kaylea

Lemons, reporter of the Harrison County chapter. “When I put on my jacket I know that anyone else with it on is just as willing to help me out even in the simplest ways, no matter where they live. As I walked around camp there was not one unhappy face or one lonely person. Even if you don’t know the people, because you are in FFA, you have trust in them.”

A pink lemonade lesson

Everyone has something they remember from FFA camp, whether it is a new friend or a new lesson learned, but one memory everyone shares is the famous pink lemonade. No matter who you are or where you come from, pink lemonade is commonly loved all around camp.

The pink lemonade is one of many reasons people love to come to FFA camp. It has just the right sourness and just the right sweetness.

It can sometimes teach us a thing or two. Such as, we all need to share. The pink lemonade is so good everyone wants to come back for seconds and take some in a bottle for later. But we have to learn to be courteous to everyone and be honest and fair in the game of life.

Not only does it stay true to the meaning of FFA, it is a great way for everyone to stay connected, because no matter where you go or where you are, you will always be able to reconnect with people over the amazing pink lemonade.

FFA Camp: A summary

Most FFA members who go to camp expect the usual activities of swimming, boating, volleyball, water ball, softball, and the list goes on.

But at the Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center, the campers have come to expect more from their stay there.

The facility is located in the small town of Hardinsburg and draws FFA members from across the state who hope to learn skills that will help them become better leaders.

During their time at camp, students attend classes, participate in team-building activities and work with their own chapter to discuss how to improve. Each activity encourages something that can be applied during their time in FFA as well as in their life.

One person who can attest to this is former Capital City State Vice President Anna Hawkins.

“Camp allowed me to meet a lot of people from other chapters and not just get to know them but learn about how other chapters do things,” she said. “It really opened up my perspective on how every chapter is unique. Knowing every chapter is awesome at something that fits their community helped me understand the diversity of Kentucky as a state officer.”

One of the many reasons that chapters go to the leadership training centers is to grow as a

chapter. This is accomplished by a two-hour chapter time each day. During this time, chapters can work among themselves and set goals for the coming year or discuss business. One day during the week, each chapter is given time to visit the camp's ropes course. There, the groups are assigned a leader and go on different elements that require teamwork and communication.

Chapters also compete in games of water ball and volleyball, which require them to work together and strategize. Many chapters see this as a bonding experience.

"Communication is a big key in having a successful FFA chapter. A fun activity that teaches this is water ball," said Maddie McClure of the Greenwood FFA in Bowling Green. "You are constantly communicating, trying to accomplish the goal. Just like in FFA, our officers have to communicate to accomplish what we want to do for the year. While water ball is a lot of fun, it can also teach a great skill needed to have a successful FFA."

Upon arriving, campers are split into athletic groups and blended with people from other schools. They then compete in many different sports. These activities give students a chance to meet new people and teach them how to work well with people they may not be familiar with.

"At camp you have to become a team with people you may or may not know, and that's the same concept on a regional or state officer team," said Hawkins.

Though Hawkins retired her FFA jacket during the State Convention in June, she hopes to stay involved in the organization and to continue applying the skills she learned at camp.

Campers also attended different classes each day of the week. Chapter officers are grouped with others of the same office and discuss their duties and responsibilities.

Two sessions of classes offer students the option of exploring a new idea or topic, or build onto another one.

Hannah Contini, president of the Garrard County FFA, said she took a class about going to college because, as a rising senior, she needed more information about different scholarship opportunities and colleges in her area.

"I also took Ag Careers because I'm interested in finding out all the opportunities I had in the agricultural field," she said. "These classes help students understand how the real world is and to learn about things beyond agriculture that can help us the rest of our lives."

The campers that attend Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center are more than just teenagers that are a part of the same club. They are tomorrow's leaders preparing for a bright future, a future focused not only on developing agriculture but also developing society.